

French forest communes and sustainable development in mountain areas

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The evolution of and recent institutional developments in management of upland forest resources as common property in France.

The various forms of common property ownership are well represented historically and geographically in the mountain regions of Europe. Given the severe environmental conditions, common property regimes, resource management practices and cultural patterns are important, with interaction between them very marked in these regions. Social anthropological research has examined and provided evidence to show the vital role of cultural mechanisms, such as forms of ownership and their transfer, in creating a balance or imbalance between resources, local communities, population growth and mountain economies (Cole and Wolf, 1974; Netting, 1981; Viazzo, 1989).

Mountain regions, with their fragile, complex ecosystems, require their inhabitants to be adaptable and to develop sustainable cultural patterns and traditions, they too as fragile as they are complex (Zingari, 1997; 1998). Despite the collapse of many common property systems, owing to the decisions taken by centralized authorities throughout this century, examples from 1 000 years of successful sustainable mountain development point up the pertinence of such systems (Morandini, 1996).

The importance of common property regimes for the sustainable development of forest resources was dealt with in a special issue of *Unasylva* which examined the theoretical arguments and provided practical examples (FAO, 1995). The points put forward showed that "there are circumstances where common property regimes are the most appropriate form of forest management - a self-reliant, participatory approach that provides sustainable benefits and ensures resource conservation".

The analysis proposed by FAO will now be examined, using the example of the French forest communes, in order to obtain a better understanding of the potential for and implications of active participation by local players -especially upland inhabitants and their representatives - in achieving the sustainable development objectives set out in the Rio Earth Summit's Agenda 21.

FRENCH FOREST COMMUNES

The proposed analysis concerns the place and institutional role of the French forest communes, and the steps they have taken both nationally and internationally to ensure that their direct responsibilities for developing environmental policy and improving socio-economic conditions are recognized.

Altogether, there are 11 000 local forest communes in France, accounting for 30 percent of all the communes in the country. They own about 3 million ha of forests (1 million ha up to the end of the nineteenth century), currently 20 percent of the country's total forest area (Delong, 1996).

The legislation governing French communal forests, which are part and parcel of the communes' private domain, is based on usage rights dating back to Roman times and to the Middle Ages (Lacroix, 1998). In France, most communal forests are to be found in upland areas. Nowadays, these forests have a vital part to play in local development in that they are involved in small business activities, tourism and providing employment, and have a general-interest, multipurpose role.

Although the Conseils Municipaux (i.e. the town councils), the decision-making bodies in French communes, are recognized as the authorities responsible for implementing environmental policy at the local level (Ministère de l'agriculture, 1990) and the communes own the land and the resources, decentralization, decided by the French Parliament in 1983, has not resulted in the transfer to these local authorities of the powers held by the state in matters regarding forest policy.



A common property forested area in the Jura, France

As a result, the state is in charge of community forest management under the forestry regime applicable to all public forests since 1827. The National Forestry Department, a public body established in 1964, is now responsible for managing these forests, which cover the greater part of its remit. The annual biological increment is 11 million m³ and the harvesting of wood products amounts to 7.5 million m³, producing annual earnings of FF 1.7 billion. Good management results and the quality of the forest resources have led to a radical change in the relationship between local communities and their management authority. The mayors' role in the management of their forests involves ensuring that the countryside and the economic area falling under their responsibility are managed for the benefit of all (Communes forestières, 1990).

In 1933, the forest communes joined forces within a voluntary association (the Federation of French Forest Communes), the role of which has gradually expanded so that it now:

- democratically represents all the communal forest owners and conveys their views to the national political players;
- provides continuing training for local players, mayors and town council representatives;
- actively contributes to local forest conservation and sustainable development.

In an attempt to clarify the responsibilities of the communal owners and the tasks entrusted to the National Forestry Department, a Communal Forest Charter was adopted in 1991 (FNCFF and ONF, 1991). The founding principle of the charter is strong partnership, based on information sharing and continuing dialogue. The aim is to work together in order to "safeguard the future of communal forests, ensure that they play an active part in the economic life of the community and maintain the balance in the countryside, thereby improving the quality of life of present and future generations".

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE FOR MOUNTAIN FORESTS

Action by the forest communes has become a determining factor in sustainable upland forest management, based on full respect for the rights of the communal owners, for local cultural identities and for socio-economic equilibrium, as part of an integrated rural development approach.

In order to achieve these objectives, the Federation of French Forest Communes has taken a number of measures. On a national scale, it has mobilized the political partners in the Conseil Supérieur de la Forêt to define 15 proposals concerning the harmonization and development of research, training, protection measures, forestry activities and products, and the integrated management of upland forests in the countryside (Ministère de l'agriculture, 1995). These proposals constitute a meaningful national action programme for the sustainable development of mountain forests.

On the European front, the federation has proposed a European Mountain Forest Charter for all the players concerned (Fédération européenne des communes forestières, 1995). By bringing together European country and FAO representatives, the Federation is also behind the European Mountain Forest Observatory, launched on the occasion of an international conference in 1996 (Zingari, 1996). The observatory is an ongoing forum for the exchange of information, for dialogue and for interaction between all the parties involved in mountain forest conservation and sustainable development. It is endeavouring to put forward international recommendations, monitor environmental and socio-economic changes, assess the measures taken and define operational solutions in cooperation with existing organizations' networks.

CONCLUSION

Strengthened by partnership links and by the participation of all their members, the French forest communes, the direct, major players in sustainable management, have been contributing to conservation and development since 1933. Like many other forestry institutions in Europe, they deserve attention and an in-depth comparison of their experience and results capable of refocusing efforts to ensure sustainable development in mountain regions worldwide. FAO's research programme into international forestry resources and institutions (IFRI) provides the ideal framework for this objective (McKean and Ostrom, 1995).

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